

## Kicking with Vision

Open a book to learn a kicking system and you may be advised that, while systems offer precision, players wishing to learn them should first acquire a strong sense of feel. Presumably then, systems would have little value to players who lack a good feel for the table or for differences among various tables. I tend to agree and might list a few more areas in which we need good feel.

So, now that we know we need it, what is it? And where does it come from? Certainly we all have experiences where we look at a challenge and, without giving it the slightest thought, just *know* that we'll succeed, whether it's banking a ball cross corner or throwing a paper wad into a wastebasket. At other times it may seem that the simplest shots or tasks lie so far beyond our grasp that quitting looms as the smart choice. What accounts for the difference? Is it feel? Instead of wasting time trying to define it, let's work on sharpening our feel.

Back in '99 I got a phone call one day that sounded like a lot of the calls I get to arrange instruction. After we set a time and date for our first session, the caller mentioned that he's blind. "Alright!" I blurted out enthusiastically, knowing that here was a great and rare opportunity to meet my game on a higher level and prove myself as an instructor. Then, as our first day together approached, my enthusiasm gave way to fear as I realized I had no idea where to begin or how to proceed. And of course, no names came to mind for guidance.

We began with our hands as I took his and moved them around the table in various ways to give him an idea of its dimensions and makeup. For shot making he learned to make a consistent stance on the line where his cue lay and was soon pocketing balls with remarkable frequency. For position he used sound to gauge speed and the distinction between a sliding cue ball and a rolling one to pull off some small runs. After working at it for two months he declared himself ready to enter a tournament. Our only request from his opponents was to allow my verbal coaching; I never touched him or the equipment. To everyone's delight he won several games in his two matches, one of them with a 9 ball on the break. There's a lot to learn from that story and one must wonder what we might achieve if we could understand and tap into his relationship to the table. While watching him compete I noted an uncanny feel in his game, and a certain sense of vision that clearly transcended sight.

In the absence of supernatural sensory powers the rest of us must nurture our feel through considerable experience and focused work. Fortunately we have a superb exercise that works well to accelerate the process of honing our feel for the table. It's an old kicking game that involves throwing three object balls onto the table randomly with the cue ball, and kicking at them until the table is empty, a freeform adventure with no rules and only a few guidelines.

In light of my faith in the power of repeated success as a catalyst for improvement, this exercise departs sharply from my usual practice routines. If you think of pocketing balls as success, then the vast majority of shots in this kicking exercise must be deemed failures. Since nobody clears the table in a hurry, it's wise to set aside any concern for results in favor of immersing yourself in the process of mapping out the table. The shots are not so much there for you to miss or make as they are to observe and experience. With that in mind it's important to take time before each shot to visualize what will happen instead of slapping the cue ball around the table in a mindless rush for it to be over.

If you know some kicking systems, set them aside at first to see how well you can predict the cue ball's various paths without them, especially with shots that use two rails or more. We want to uncover feel and will find faster access to it through an organic rather than systematic approach. Although we're working with a simple rectangle that submits nicely to math, a pool table also summons the imagination to solve many of its mysteries. And here's an opportunity to perform wholly in the creative realm.

As in competitive pool you will shoot mostly one, two or three-rail kicks. But since you don't want to set boundaries on your vision, if you see four or five-rail kick shots waiting to be made, go for them. What may seem crazy now can resurface as knowledge later. For shots that employ two or more rails you will find that running english will yield the most predictable tracks. But again, feel free to experiment with reverse english or none at all. And finally, because you want to experience the shots completely, it's a good idea to repeat them, making adjustments with each successive attempt as you zero in on sharp, confident feel.

Because it would be a shame to do such creative work without stepping out a little, try pushing the envelope further by playing some of your kick shots with your eyes closed. It sounds outrageous but it may not be so wild as one might think. Every beginner who works with me pockets at least a few balls with eyes closed in the very first session. Doing so somehow dissolves certain distractions while introducing the player to genuine aiming, a process that dwells beyond the usual one-dimensional, contact-point conversation. Though I can often manage to run a few balls while closing my eyes before each final stroke, closing them in this kicking exercise feels foreign. But, I'll stay with it hoping that someday I may touch the kind of vision that my friend who can't see has.

